

THE HOUSE YOU DREAM IN

by
Amanda Gunn

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ABSTRACT

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Thesis Advisor: David Yezzi

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HOLD

VENUS

Oh miracle, oh Venus as the one
of Willendorf, now washed

in sweat, beyond
the possibility of motherhood. Tonight

you've blessed my living room, reclined upon
the couch as on

a chaise. And stripped of all the things
that make you seem

a paradox: the working boots, the hems
that draw you in. What's left?

A hip that splays and asks
for no excuse. A breast that slacks against

a hairy pit. The open hand you've used
to every end, as when we woke,

to please yourself and me. The heavy knee, the soft
and massive belly. Here,

naked, you're free. I wonder what it means
for you to have

this body you were dealt,
if, when you dress, it's armor that you wear,

made for a man. And what it means that I
should love you best

when you're bare: a goddess, calm,
at rest.

BACK TO HOME

I wish you had been my daughter, my little girl-
who-was-a-boy, hiking the hills, back, “back
to home,” in Transylvania. I would have left off
the bow when I dressed you for the Communists,
and not given your brother sweets while you
polished the hall, kneeling. An ocean
and an uprising away from that wooden
corridor, your mother kisses you so hard
it hurts your ears, and you turn her aside
to the kitchen, to a solitude where
none but you speaks her language. In her fragmented
English, she seems only kind: our friends
eat her soup, call her Mama. They don’t understand
the language in which she calls you “bitch,”
and keeps counsel with a son who left his words
in another country. Now, as we hold each other
through a midwinter snow, I speak tenderness
such as you have taught me—*szeretlek*
and *egyem meg a kicsi szívedet*: “I love you”
and “I want to eat your little heart.”

THE LAST DAY

Romania, 1986

The last day she ever played soccer,
Kati traveled on foot from state hospital

to state hospital, kicked
like a ball between them—not a child,

nor an adult, and more a Hungarian.
Her knee twisted, sinews

torn, white bone nearly bare. She
hobbled on the arm of Rabbit, who

bore her weight with effort, though
Kati was much lighter then. Telling

the story, Kati looks off, looks
within, not bothering to wish

that the nurses had done
their duty, but that she'd had

a chicken to bribe them. More
than chocolate or even cigarettes,

whole chickens came with
difficulty then. Every

few weeks, swallowing their
tongues about the government,

her family would line up
in two-hour shifts.

First grandma, then grandpa, Kati,
her mother, waiting for the sackful

of beaks and sharp-toed
feet on ice. Chicken

Surprise, they called it. There wasn't
much meat, but it did make a decent soup.

MONARCH

So little left of Grandma Jessie: hymns,
her words like *hoo-dee-rah!* for heat, the gold-
framed photograph, some fritillary pins.
Her husband left when they were young. He told
her that his intellect was like a fire—
he burned, while she was country, sweet, and cold.
Alone and free, she fixed to her attire
butterflies whose pearls seemed to flash, unmold.
Her flat, unpeopled country's still the scene
through which her favored monarchs fold, unfold
themselves from north and home to certain sun,
their wings cathedral glass, unfettered, bold.
Our Jessie saw them, recognized her kind,
and, seeing, lifted skyward in her mind.

FORGETTING ALREADY

Everything having been said about ending,
you crank the car radio
while I hold my own hand, remembering
two ways we've ended before:

in an Old Navy dressing room,
pink bikinis on the floor, and once
among lilacs, you and I, wrapped
in their sweetness, enraged,

shivering, awake, and forgetting already
how it felt to lie slack, salted, open
for one another, our whole bodies full
and ready for sleep.

MORNING AT CRASH BOAT

I thought I'd die that way—cold in my sunburned skin, in the sweet
unxenia waters of Aguadilla.

Do you remember the last morning we swam off Crash Boat Beach?
Beneath the surface of what was green and felt infinite,

we waggled our limbs. It was the strength of our legs
that kept us there, though perhaps it should have been something else:
You should have lifted me into the wave, but I
wouldn't let you. There were lovers speaking Spanish

when the tide came in. Then ta-da! You asked me why, your eye
fixed on a man with a gull on his hat.

What could I say—that I will never choose you?
That night, your mouth cloying with aspartame

and whiskey, you said *stay*. You said *not yet*.
You held my vulva in your palm.

MASHED POTATOES

My mother never forgave my father
for calling them “mauled” potatoes:

those lumps of white starch and
margarine. It was the first

year of their marriage. He was always
clever with word-shit

and terrible with people. I didn’t grow up eating
mashed potatoes. She baked them for us,

French-fried them, boiled them
and made salad,

and my father got what was left at night.
Now, forty years later, he still

tells that story; her right eye will twitch,
his laugh pressing her optic nerve.

When we speak he says: “No,
you should have said *this*” and “this”

is always something more clever. He never
forgave my mother for having us,

three children who knew better
how to talk to her,

how to open up our mouths
and eat our dinner.

ALL THINGS

Across a distance you're
the one I've wanted, ever.

There is no plate of fish
to fry. There's never snow

tracked on the floor. I hear
a bottle clink the sink

across the phone and know
I've dreamt this. Is that sound

you, eating onion? Is
your foot beneath the dog?

I like to say I've brought
you here with me, but I

just have a picture: you,
as drowsy, ruddy, loose

as I can ever quite
recall, the obstacle

to what I longed for when
I left you in the fall.

ELEGY FOR A CHILD

From when I was ten and holding
 a sketch of what was
to be my body, time brought
 me closer to you.
Now, each morning as light breaks,
 you're laid to rest yet
deeper in my dreaming. I
 am sentimental,
I know, watching my mother's
 mothering put to
a kind of waste. Those long hours
 we spoke, we wept, she
taught me how one holds tight to
 a child's grief. I did
not bleed waiting for you; that's
 not precisely how
wombs work. I went about my
 business, feeding the
cat, watering the tulips,
 having wrong lovers
to dinner, while your future
 sloughed off, out of me.

THE HOUSE, TOO

for Grandma Jessie

Your tiny house endures at Eads and Wright.
We lived within those termite-bitten walls:
it's there you accidentally got me lit
on daiquiris when I was four feet tall.
The nights would spark and hum with fireflies,
but when I miss that place I miss its taste,
its soft, peculiar smells: those peonies;
the moldy wooden door; the dirt, once host
to dogs; the pantry packed with sweets you'd save.
My memories slip my grip like tadpoles down
the drain beside the yard. And we, who gave
you back to earth, are gone. What happens now?
We visit, creep down Eads, and think of you,
and tsk-tsk-tsk at things the tenants do.

AFTER SURGERY

She wasn't dying, except
abstractly, my mother.

Just replacing each case
of bone on bone until

one by one her joints
were titanium. My brother

and I told jokes across
the hospital bed, made her

laugh her flute-like laugh,
played sound bites

of the bionic woman
leaping felled trees.

Later, light burning
the windows, she sat small

as death in her chair, whispering
mercy, so in pain

as to cry tears
without wiping them.

My brother fetched ice, I
mustered the nurses, my father

bent his head toward
his laptop, soothing

himself with cooing
sounds. How diminished

he, too, seemed, an old man
who loved her, who

could do nothing, his mind
as shut as an egg.

A COMMONPLACE

Don't tell me *don't worry*.
Crust of flesh, dish

of peonies—we
are no more than this.

There is a persistent taste
of mold in my mouth,

reminding me what becomes
of a body. Nothing terrifies me

so much as losing you, though
it would be a commonplace.

Mothers leave us in this way,
as we leave them.

You gave me this body
to make babies with; I

have not used it as intended.
I'm still taking lessons, learning

recitations. Saturday
I read you Yeats (*a tattered coat*

upon a stick). You shuddered
and why shouldn't you? While I

could hardly finish.
Don't tell me, *don't worry*.

SONG OF LEAVE-TAKING

Give me your mother.
Let her teach me how
she cooked under Ceaușescu:
one-egg palascinta,
paprikas without cream.

Let this be recorded in me.
I don't mind,
I don't mind.

Where is the pail your mother keeps?
I'll collect the onions
from the dirt beside the driveway.
I'll hide tomatoes in my apron
and eat them as I work.

Let me be a helpmeet.
I don't mind,
I don't mind.

Show me these photographs.
You looked like a boy
in lace and hair-ribbon:
daughter of your country,
your country, your country.

Then I said:
We'll go to your country, come.
Take me to the valley you searched alone.
We'll look down on the lake of stones
and find your father.

Let me be a helpmeet.
I don't mind,
I don't mind.

And your house was full,
so you offered me the attic.
My thoughts were unquiet,
so you hushed the dogs.

You took moonshine at breakfast.

Your mother had steeped it
with caraway and sugar.

Please, forgive my intruding.
Never mind,
never mind.

MAGGIE ON BEECH STREET

Maggie kept chickens, a truck, and a house
with a Sunday school teacher on Beech Street.
The church brothers winked, swallowed their voices,
called her the *man of the house*. It was those
overalls and the hands by which she earned
her living, cleaned out the gutters, carried
the trash to the curb on Thursdays.

Really,
she didn't mind, knowing (as they did not)
how for years she had prayed to be transformed
in God's love, peering under the covers
at what felt like a vacancy, her prayers
emptying out into morning.

Then there
was Enola, who gathered the eggs, who
rubbed Maggie's hands with oil. Enola
kissed her on the throat, held her at her breast,
took her into her opening body
as if, doing so, she might bear Maggie
again into the world, remake her as
she was always meant to be.

They grew beans
in summer. It was 1935.

LOOK

LOOK

Knowing Emmett Till
was born in forty-one

and my father in forty-two,
knowing Emmett Till

was murdered in Mississippi
while my father was growing up

in Alabama,
knowing how quick my father

was to whistle, to hum,
to talk back, to flirt

with a girl, I turned my head
in the classroom. Turned

my head from the photograph,
from the misshapen fruits

of a river, from the luck
that made me. Stupid child:

It's 1992.
Your father will be there

at the dinner table.
There is a mother whose son

was lost in Mississippi.
She's telling you: *Look*.

HIGHWAY

What brings us here can barely be called
highway: a thread of road each direction,

and vines overtaking the verge.
This isn't a dream: Dad is driving.

We find at the end of the path three towns
where my father was someone else once.

Here, houses are the hue of dust,
and sunflowers lean in the swelter.

At the Florence Sonic Burger, you'll get
a coke for your church program. There are

no mountains in our midst, just twenty-three
Churches of Christ—this is

the land in which they are grown. This is
the land in which he was grown, before

something sent him searching. Was it
my mother waiting unknown, was it

the pulpit he couldn't preach from,
was it a mask of his own face, speaking:

a foreigner from up North?

DINNER BELL

After the rain has come along and swept
the evergreens, after the crows have stilled
the forest with their wings, after they've leapt
into the fog, we hear our mother's bell
and spot far off the lights I won't forget:
the yellow lamp, the TV on, the bare
white bulb above the stove, her cigarette,
still lit, converging as our Northern Star.
We're eight and nine, back from the barn that burned,
an outing that you didn't want to lead.
It always was the two of us. We learned
to hone our anger in the wetland weed.
Grimy those nights, we trudged from Muddy Lake,
both hungry from the wars that children make.

STORMWATCHING IN CAMPANIA

for my brothers

You could have found us anywhere,
 on the bank of any
 undulating river;
we didn't have to be
 in the shadow
 of someone's volcano,
wine nearby,
 watching lightning
 shatter the upper sky,
olives pelting lazily
 the slate;
 there didn't have to be
lemon trees
 loosed of their fruit,
 nor wisteria
ascending the stone.

 We needed only
 each other and to forget
what it meant
 to be weighted,
 grown, distinct.
We needed only
 to rest a while
 in pregnant darkness,
our hands empty,
 our eyes absent
 of electronic
white light.

GLADYS ON DUBLIN STREET

Urbana, Ill., 1936

Up Dublin Street at twilight, Gladys
waits at windows, watching night unroll its carpet

onto the floors of the house. She stopped
the clock when she sent her girls to carry

the plate she'd laid for their father who works
nights at the hospital lot gathering tips. She'd baked

the cornbread, buttered the rice, turned out
the pinto beans before burning,

though there are times when the shadow comes and she
forgets. That hovering white face, white

breath inside her breath, her heels in the icy
stirrups where the nurse had placed them. She was young

then and golden, eyes pale
as the gray lake, hair smooth without lye, her nose

keen enough. Now she walks only
to church, though she'll often look

towards town. She'll take
company if the pastor stops. He holds her hand as if

it were a sparrow, says:
You must not name the devil. But these things

do have a way
of naming themselves.

REFLEXOLOGY

I am another woman's daughter and
my godmother Mary's also. I have
Mary's smile and hypoglycemia, her arthritic
toes, her well of melancholy.
On a Saturday afternoon, we see red
and black velvet Christmas dresses
in the downstairs of a department store. Mary
smiles at me, mentions some
child I will have that she didn't have.
I frown, withhold a joke
about clocks, look off down the bright avenue
of housewares. I remind her
I turned thirty-seven last week.
At the Zen Center, amid orchids
and red plastic wall hangings, Mary takes me
to see her healers. They nod
as she lists my complaints, then a woman
presses her fingers into my feet:
This is for bowel. This is for pancreas.
This is for heart.

LITTLE BLUE BOX

After this I will no longer
write poems about you.
I will gather
my belongings, sort them
into KITCHEN, BEDROOM,
LIVINGROOM, MISC,
and go north
towards you, my home.
You'll be there
in the bed. Your mother
upstairs, her TV so loud
I can feel it
in my kidneys.

I have spoken
what words I might-should
have kept to myself.
Stirred you up—my kettle
of ginger tea, spicier now
that I have hurt you.

My big,
fat mouth got your eyes
snapping with light, and you
talking again of second jobs
and four months' pay,
and little things
that some women want.

A LONG WAYS

My mother's father never knew the man
who fathered him, though daily when he'd shave,
he'd see the bluer eyes, the paler hand
that underlay his own. His mother gave
her son what start she could from scrubbing clothes,
but no word of the man she'd met—or where—
in love or something darker. Not to know
that history was a shame he seemed to wear.
He wandered far afield, from home to war,
to work, to marriage, out of marriage, gone.
He left the little girls his young wife bore,
still looking for a father, finding none.
In summer he slept days and woke by night,
humming *Motherless Child* till dark was light.

GO NORTH

Picture yourself at the bus stop, the sun
on the brick of the bank.

Imagine real dollars in your pocket,
a woolen coat,
a satchel full of chicken and cake.

Your mother will be at your back,
head tilted as if to say
she knew. As if to say
a mother's duty is to be disappointed.
Don't worry.

Her sister will still feed you in Chicago
and tell you where to find
warmer shoes.

You wouldn't believe me if I told you
about the cold, how the air will blacken
over your park-bench.

Does it matter?

You will find a church.

You will meet a woman.

You will find yourself nearly whole.

BROADWAY BOOGIE WOOGIE

There was what
he meant
to do then the street

at night asserted
light then
taxi then delivery truck

Underneath the hum
smoke rhythm
from a dance-hall band

How clearly you can see
New York
shimmy in yellow

and red, especially
the blues He died knowing
he'd come so close

but still had painted
a thing akin
to the house you dream in

EXCAVATION

Early in the summer morning
 we gather, each of us from a bed
far-flung, someone's three children
 graying at the temples.

Beside us stands the hollow Dumpster,
 massive, attendant, rebuilt
of rust, the deep of it glistening
 with a night's good rain. Ken

moves first. He lifts
 the garage doors and gets
the dust shimmering where
 the house that once held us

meets fresh air. I follow him in
 as fast as I can bear. Beneath
a network of pipes, we uncover
 Christmas decorations, their

wrappings trimmed with blooms
 of mold. There's
a wise man, some sheep,
 a baby Jesus our father painted black—

his swaddling blanket near
 to unraveling—and some
red globes splintering
 from the heat. I want

to pile them up for repairs, hold
 the hope our parents
placed in them when they
 were twenty-three.

Ken photographs instead what he
 won't let me keep: a big-wheel,
a Stevie Wonder record, a
 Hershey's Frisbee smelling faintly

of chocolate, and goes on
rolling. Greg shadows him, crushing
each object and hurling it out
towards a bottomless past.

CHAMPAIGN COUNTY GOTHIC

I heard the keyboard rattle. Something
unfurled hot in my chest
and held me there in the bed. I could hear
the shuffling of work boots, see wiry arms, the outline

of a painter's hat. Limbs full of blood again,
I sprang up
to stand behind the doorjamb, clutching a glass lampshade.
I didn't know what to do so I called him

a motherfucker, thinking of all the things he might have come
to take from me. I surprised myself—watching
the horror movie you wonder who you'd be, if you
would slip beneath the surface of terror, await

execution under the sheets. Or if, heroically, you would grasp
what was needed. There's an algorithm
to survival. I assured him I hadn't seen his face, told him
to climb out the way he'd come. He didn't answer. When deeper night

overtook the house and I could hear no more, I crept out
to where he'd stood. The desk lamp
showed him gone, the windows unbroken.
I slunk back to bed, lampshade still in hand.

The next day Aunt Laura came; we clasped arms and
said a prayer to cure the ghost's restlessness. I apologized
for calling him a motherfucker. It was,
after all, his house,

my some-great uncle, unmet. I was told he'd been
a housepainter and had visited Grandma Jessie before me. He was
a dirty old soul. He'd come round once while she was
leaving the bath and pinched her ass.

LIGHT I: *CAT AND MOTH*

Deadlocked in argument,
the cat and moth sit, lit
beneath the lamp: the cat
enthralled beyond hunger,
want of water on the tongue;
the moth trapped, soul-torn
between certain death
(that great harrowing beast)
and this—the seduction of light.

LIGHT II: *BRIGHT MOON BRIGHT*

Bright moon, bright powder-colored moon
 above my windows, bathed
in pools of starlight, moon above
 the whole of Baltimore,
so bright that I mistake you for
 the sun, the sun at dawn,
with chill and grasping hands that reach
 inside my bed. You bright,
you flinty, frosty moon, release
 me, let me free of you
and down into the sweet ravine
 of sleep. Where is your shroud
of dusk, cold moon? Why do you light
 my sins, my flickering dust?

LIGHT III: *TO DEATH*

Strange I have resisted you
all this time, worried
you work your will

against me in the dark.
How wrong I was.
You mean the advent

of daybreak, its
attendant tendrils of light.
True, you are the oak

inclining itself to earth
in autumn. Do you not,
too, beckon what

rustles beneath the leaves?

MY FATHER SPEAKS

I.

His brother Lafayette
died at the creek
with six boys
standing round him.

My mother told me
these things. Neither of us
knows anything
for certain.

II.

In school in Connecticut
the other black children
mocked me for the way
I spoke (wannabe-white-girl-
Oreo-cookie). I could hear
North Carolina, Georgia
in their voices, the journey
from South to North
that our parents, grandparents
had taken. I lived
in a white neighborhood.
They thought I spoke
like my neighbors. Each time
I opened my mouth, how
those children must have believed
I hated them.

Then
they shunned me and I did.

III.

My father is a talking man
and speaks as though
he loves the taste
of his words. He says "purdy,"
as in "purdy as a pan
of buttermilk biscuits,"
which I am
and am told regularly. When I

point this out to him,
this word of home,
he says the word "pretty"
so many times I begin
to forget who he is. I hope
I am never pretty.

IV.

We go back home. There is
yellow brick and dust and clay
I think belong to me.
We play kickball on Christmas day
and my sneakers redden
in the mud. When I speak,
my cousins call me white girl.
They laugh when I say "y'all."

V.

I learned to speak from my father.

VI.

The year he desegregated
the university, my father
wore silence wherever
he went. Some wished
it would be
his death shroud.

The voices

came at night
on the telephone, threatening
a brick against his head or
buckshot to his gut, his father
to be turned out
of the metal factory,
his mother's house to be
brought to kindling.

There was one

white girl who smiled
at him each day on his way
to the library. If he had dared
to speak to her, he
would have begged:

Do not be kind to me.

He could feel his starched
collar tight, hear rope
creaking against pine.

VII.

Father, burden me. Tell me
the story of how you slept

at night. Tell me, was
the governor at the gate,

and did your father gaze
through the window into

the long evening? Tell me
about Lafayette and what

it meant when we hung
a wreath on the door

that Christmas. Tell me
about the night you left

for Chicago, never to come back
except on holiday. Burden me

with your secret voices.
Tell me about your mother

and the restaurant
that went under

when they let her go.

WADE

*Wade in the water, children, wade in the water,
God's a-gonna trouble the water.*

INVOCATION

You gaze at me
from above my desk, you are

unsmiling, small in the world,
your shoulders rolled forward

into a servant's invisibility.
Quiet radical. Master thief.

Seeker of confederate bombs. Leader
of men into the breach.

Your left hand holds down
your right hand, still

trembling with purpose.
Most faithless slave, most

faithful sister. Harriet,
in your serviceable dress, pale

tuft of scarf. Hair braided back
as our mothers taught us.

THE LUXURY OF FRUIT

Harriet Tubman to her young husband, Auburn, New York, 1869

How hairy this peach you bring me from market
 How fragile and torn the skin of your back
How bright this lemon in the pocket of your overalls
 How tender this ear lobe between my thumb and finger
How soft this plum gone deep into its sweetness
 How rough the weave of my working dress
How firm this quince you pull from the field
 How slick the oil of your aching shoulder
How hard the stones of these sour cherries
 How fine and steady your knee beneath me
How green, how tart, how cold this apple
 How pebbled your skin by the breeze from the door
How warm these grapes from under the sun
 How strong your thigh against my teeth
How ripe the crop of this strawberry patch
 How coarse my palms, the soles of my feet
How bitter the pith you peel from the orange
 How heavy and how cool my breast
How honeyed this pear you cut with your knife
 How bare my long and ticklish neck
How full of juice this blackened berry
 How thin my wrist in the grip of your hand
How hungry you are, how hungry I am
 How bountiful and rich our God
How sweet such fruits as He gives in the free world
 How sure these lips, how sure these lips

MYSTIC

A two-pound object, hurled
skyward and intended to punish
another, smashed into
Harriet Tubman's skull
in the dry goods market. It
splintered bone, ground the fabric
of her kerchief so deep
as to touch her mind.

Not worth

a sixpence, her master would
say of her afterward. She was
thirteen, what some would call
a child.

Thereafter, she'd see
starlight descending, the herald of
a holy voice. And a slumber
would sweep her body, even as
she spoke, though it
would not rest her, would not
relieve her, merely take her
deep, deep, deep.

Years later:

winter, blessed darkness,
frost, the stars
blue-flaming the icy waters
they wade. No
promise of blanket or barn. Just
God telling her "go"
and "now."

Araminta—

African lady, with eyes that
pierce the mist—

you yield

to prayer, they yield
to you.

Moses,

they say, *Moses got the charm*.

RAID AT COMBAHEE RIVER, JUNE 2, 1863

They moved over
the rice fields, not
in flight
not
in murmurations
not moving
as one black body against
the wind, but in
the terrible
breaking of a dam
over the
Combahee River.
Women jostling babies, packets
of bread and fat,
grasping
chickens, holding
pots still
hot with rice,
men dragging pigs, shouldering
children, children running
on thin limbs
catching up or
being caught under,
where
alligators snapped,
bit
as the maw
of the shackle.
The sly
boats whistled, signaled:
we are here, you
seven hundred fifty-six, you
shall not be left
to the Confederacy.
Out front:
the General
watching for torpedoes,

Harriet
singing a hymn,
Moses,
parting
the waters.

COUNTERWEIGHT

It wasn't a brick or a stone that the overseer threw in her direction,
but a counterweight.

Like this one, the man says. And he drops something
into my hand, which dips deeply
under the heft of it.

I roll it around in my palm. It's no bigger than an egg,
shaped like a bell with no tongue or like
a lily of the valley
turned downward in spring. The object
against which flour was measured or nails.
The object against which escape was measured—hurled skyward,
intended for another.

He says he wishes his wife were here: *It's more exciting*
the way she tells it. He does his best. Stutters
as he tells me of his great-great-grandfather,
who owned both land and the people who worked it.

He instructs me
that black men owned slaves also. He wants me to know
his ancestor's kindness,
that he gave them land to worship on—
the land against which freedom was measured.

Beside us in the field, a black boy
passes on a John Deere.

I nod, I say: *Yes, that was kind*.

TRAITOR

An early snow hovers
without landing, moves
upwards with wind. Seven
pairs of boots slog

in the marsh. Six men
behind, following her,
following
the drinking gourd. Samuel

limps, lest his foot
press too deeply into the mud. The others
have bound it, offered arms
to lean upon. He thinks of his wife at

the firelight with
their daughter, holds them
inside of himself against
the wind, against

his shame. He will learn tonight:
he who whimpers
at the pain of his foot,
he who turns his head

southward, he who would go back
to the whip, to his woman's
dark body,
he who has seen the secrets

of the railroad and would tell them—
Harriet will order shot.
Nobody goes back, she'll tell him.
And to the others: *Get your guns*.

CROPS, ENDLESS AND DISAPPEARING

I can't get away from that bridge. Out,
Bestpitch Ferry Road. Past what is now
Blackwater Refuge—the swamp, the trees

where she'd wait weeks before others
could join her. I'm there now, on the bridge,
breathing. I'm thinking: *On this very ground.*

I'm saying her name over the Transquaking
waters, over the conduit to a faraway life.
My boots pressing the wood of the bridge.

The dun-colored water moving against itself.
This is what it means to be hollowed out,
filled in with swamp water, filled as a low cloud,

filled with borrowed memory. Far afield
I can hear a shotgun fire. And new wheat
breaks the ground in even rows.

ARAMINTA

Before she was
the General, before she
was Moses, before
she was Harriet Tubman, she
was *Araminta*. A name
of two roots:
Arabella, meaning
“yielding to prayer”
and Aminta,
“the defender.”
O,
the might of her arm!
Perhaps her mother, Rit,
had felt the squeeze
of her baby’s fist.
And didn’t she know
her child would peer
into the marsh, search
for the face of God,
and find it?

EASTERN SHORE GHAZAL

At Long Wharf Park, a great blue heron guards the water,
a patient fisher leaning his beak toward stirring water.

Now-peaceful Long Wharf, where whole bodies became this:
strong legs, good teeth, backs to carry bathtub water.

Araminta's grandmama in the ship's heavy heat.
Stench of shit, dead flesh. The air outside, soft as water.

Black sailors—freemen—bearing news and friends, showed
Araminta the Northern Star to travel by land and water.

To this shore she'd return, hide for months among trees:
patient fisher of men by the Transquaking River water.

When Moses went to die in the home she built for the poor,
her lungs filled up to choking with thick green water.

Imagine me, Amanda Gunn, traversing this bridge,
Mahalia singing me there—*Children, wade in the water!*

NOTES

“A Long Ways”

The title of this poem is suggested by the lyrics of the African American spiritual “Motherless Child” (traditional).

“Broadway Boogie Woogie”:

The title of this poem is from the painting of the same name by Piet Mondrian (Dutch, 1872–1944). Oil on canvas, 50 in. x 50 in., Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York.

“Wade”:

The title and epigraph of this series are from the African American spiritual “Wade in the Water” (traditional).

For the historical details in these poems, I consulted the following texts: Catherine Clinton, *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom* (New York: Back Bay/Little Brown, 2004), print; Earl Conrad, *Conrad/Tubman Collection* (Schomburg Collection of Negro Literature and History, New York Public Library, 1971), microfilm; “Fugitive Slave Act 1850,” *Avalon Project* (Yale Law School Lillian Goldman Law Library, 2008), Web, 15 March 2014, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/fugitive.asp; Lois E Horton, *Harriet Tubman and the Fight for Freedom: A Brief History With Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2013), print; Elias Jones, *History of Dorchester County, Maryland* (Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins, 1902), e-book; Kate Clifford Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero* (New York: Ballantine, 2004), print; William Still, *The Underground Railroad: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, &c., Narrating the Hardships, Hair-breadth Escapes and Death Struggles of the Slaves in Their Efforts of Freedom, as Related by Themselves and Others, or Witnessed by the Author* (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1872), e-book.

BIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Amanda Gunn was born in Morristown, New Jersey, and grew up in Stamford, Connecticut. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in rhetoric from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and worked as a medical copy editor for twelve years. Gunn is the recipient of the 2014 Auburn Witness Poetry Prize Honoring Jake Adam York. She lives and teaches in Baltimore, Maryland, where she is a Master of Fine Arts candidate and Owens Scholars Fellow in The Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University, and where she serves as an editorial assistant for *The Hopkins Review*. Gunn's work appears or is forthcoming in *Redivider*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Thrush*, and *New South*, among other publications.